What Is Religion?

With a tribute to Charles Dollbrook

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What is Religion?

In my journeyings over the earth, when traveling to and fro, I beheld priests and prelates, preachers and evangelists, bishops and archbishops—folks of the Ecclesiastical sort—robed in black, tied in white, gaitered in dignity, aproned with authority, gowned with respectability; wearing the cardinal hue of a high superiority, and jewelled according to their rank and class. And I said: "This is Religion!" But a spirit within me inquired: "Is this-Religion?"

So I journeyed on and in my wanderings I beheld—monasteries, nunneries, churches, chapels, cathedrals, seminaries, schools, academies, colleges, retreats, and cloisters. And I said with sincere appreciation: "This is Religion!" But a voice within me inquired: "Is this Religion?"

So I journeyed on and in my pilgrimage and as I journeyed I beheld what seemed to be Religion enthroned in art. All the consecrated genius of the artist; all the enduring monuments of the architect; all the flaming wings of color and tone; all the breathing creations which live in brass and bronze; all the frozen music in marble and granite; all

the life speaking forms of man and animal; all the architecture of beauty—chancel and altar, gate and gallery, court and cloister, nave and aisle, dome and pillar, springing arch and leaping spire; floors of mosaic, windows of flame—ever enduring, age outlasting, time defying, thought inspiring, spirit impelling. And I said: "This is Religion!" But an inquiring voice inquired: "Is this Religion?"

So I journeyed on. And in my perambulations: I discovered the literature of Religion in many volumes—creeds and creedal statements, the decrees of ecclesiastical councils, the discussions of theologians, the hymns of saints and sages, the words of the great preachers, the orations of the great prophets, and the exhortations of the evangelists.

What wonderful books were these! Books—bound in black! Books—gilt with gold! Books—clasped with silver! Books—stamped with the signs and symbols of a spiritual universe! Books which saints had wept over, maidens had treasured, youth had pondered, age had loved, and the broken-hearted had clutched in the hours of hope and despair. Books! Books! Books! Creeds! Catechisms! Commentaries! Criticisms! Compilations! And I said: "This is Religion!" But an inward voice whispered: "Is this Religion?"

So I journeyed on in search of Religion. And I beheld rostrum, pulpit, bar, forum, speaker's desk, and orator's platform. And

I thought of discussions — warm, heated, fiery, piercing, sarcastic, stinging, tearful, and blood hot. And as men spoke on "The Origin of Man," "The Nature of God," "The Age of the World," "The Destiny of the Race," "The Meaning of Sin," "The Quest of Life," "The Quality of Inspiration," "The Doom of the Wicked," and "The Glories of Heaven," I exclaimed: "Eureka! I have found it! This certainly is Religion!" But a laughing angel, near by, queried: "Is this Religion?"

And last of all I beheld the great Institutions of Religion. Institutions for the poor! Institutions for the blind! Institutions for the friendless! Institutions for the fallen! Institutions for the sick! Institutions for the young! Institutions for the old! Institutions for the incurable!

Here I beheld charity enthroned, sympathy organized, affection expressed in rules and regulations, love reduced to a system. Christianity in a corporate capacity, religion sanitary and scientific, humanitarianism organized and embellished; tenderness directed by a board of directors and governed by a constitution and by-laws.

Blue-capped officials, uniformed attendants, white-robed assistants, wise-looking doorkeepers, weary looking messengers, strange looking visitors, and so on. And I exclaimed: "Here is Religion—organized, vitalized, and systematized!" Still, my heart

was not satisfied. So I addressed myself to the wise ones of the earth.

I asked an infidel, "What is Religion?" His answer was expressed in these words: "Religion is a mystery. Religion brings no light, answers no questions, solves no problems, explains no doubts, removes no shadows, leads to no conclusion—Religion is unable to unravel the unseen, explain the unknown, realize the invisible, or define the infinite."

Then I asked an historian, "What is Religion?" And he answered, "Religion has been and is the greatest force in history. The greatest books have been religious books. The greatest characters have been religious characters. The greatest events have been religious events. The greatest wars have been religious wars. The greatest debates have been religious debates. The greatest songs have been religious songs. The greatest institutions have been religious institutions. Religion is the greatest force in history."

Then I asked a distinguished statesman: "What is Religion?" He answered, "Religion is the greatest safeguard of a civilization. Religion is the power behind the throne of law. Religion is the best guarantee of national peace and civic progress. Religion is the sheet anchor of conscience and master motive of a true manhood and a pure womanhood. Napoleon spoke as a statesman," said my friend, "when he said, 'France must have a religion!' "

After this I asked a practical politician: "What is Religion?" And he answered, "Religion is a force to be reckoned with. An active church is the politician's greatest concern. A sleeping church is the politician's best friend." Then he told me, how, in the days of the discussion of the slavery question, an excited slave holder had exclaimed: "For God's sake, keep the preachers quiet!" And he laughingly referred to Eugene V. Debs' epigram: "In those days they had wooden churches and granite preachers, but in these days we have granite churches and wooden preachers."

Once more, I asked a certain type of business man, "What is Religion?" And he answered, "Religion is religion." And he added, with a peculiar smile on his face, "Business is business." He also had upon his tongue's end such popular proverbs as: "They all do it," "When you are in Rome do as the Romans do," and "Do *him* before he does you." He added, also, "My friend, to a business man of my sort, religion is a thing aside, a thing apart, something which belongs to another world." What a compliment to religion, I said to myself.

Venturing once again, I asked a modern philosopher, "What is Religion?" He answered, "Religion is the mystery of a mental complex. All men are religious according to their mental makeup." "Religion," said he, "is ten per cent indigestion, ten per cent tra-

dition, twenty-five per cent ignorance, ten per cent fear, twenty-five per cent unconscious imitation, ten per cent mental confusion and ten per cent conscience." Then I asked him, "What is Conscience?" And he answered not.

Finally I asked a famous scientist: "What is Religion?" His answer was, "Religion does not belong to my realm. Religion belongs to the realm of psychology, mind, will, affections, poetry, art, literature, beauty, emotion, passion, faith, feeling. Religion deals with the unseen, the unknown, the invisible. Science lives on the doorstep of an invisible universe." Invisible? Yes. Love is invisible. Thought is invisible. Emotion is invisible. Force is invisible. Passion is invisible. Aspiration is invisible. What a vast realm is the Invisible!

At last I came back to my text, James 1:27: "Pure religion, and undefiled before God and the Father is this—to visit the fatherless and the widow in their affliction and to keep himself unspotted from the world."

In this passage of Scripture are to be found the three vital elements of life: Conscience! Character! Conduct! Conscience—"Before God." Character—"Unspotted." Conduct—"Visit," those who need your visitation. Religion is life!

Religion is a life, and not a litany! Religion is a character and not a creed! Religion is a spirit and not a program! Religion

is an enthusiasm and not a regulation! Religion is life—"I am come that ye might have life."

Religion is in touch with the sun, the earth, the sea, the mountain, the valley, the rose, the lily, the mart, the street, the world. Religion is "the life of God in the soul"—and the soul of man is the whole man.

Charles Holbrook of San Francisco, having died the day before,—Saturday, July 18, 1925—at the advanced age of ninety-five, Doctor Gordon paid a tribute to his memory, affirming that the life of Mr. Holbrook had been a beautiful and outstanding illustration of pure and undefiled religion.

CHARLES HOLBROOK—A TRIBUTE

The character and characteristics of Charles Holbrook may be described by the use of seven splendid words:

The first word is *Ancestry*. Charles Holbrook was born of New England stock. The granite strength of the hills of New Hampshire was in his blood. He was of an ancestry which for eight generations had lived on the bleak shores of the Atlantic Ocean. He breathed the atmosphere of an environment glorified by the high ideals of the Puritan

and the Pilgrim. How much we owe to New England!

"Wherever thought is deep and strong,
Wherever conscience fights against wrong,
Wherever manhood dares to die
And womanhood is pure and high
On mountain peak, on the plain, by the sea—
The soul's one thought shall ever be
'Thank God for old New England.'"

The second word is *Vision.* Born in 1830, he was a slender youth of almost twenty when in the year 1850 he turned his face toward the West, the Pacific, the Golden Gate, the City of St. Francis. What splendid vision! A young man in a young country! What a noble venture! Heroically to join the march of history, prophecy, humanity. How he fulfilled the poet's dream!

"Not of the sunlight,
Not of the moonlight,
Not of the starlight,
O young mariner!

Down to the haven, call your companions;
Launch your vessel and crowd your canvas,

And e'er it vanishes,
After it—follow it!
Follow the gleam."

The third word is *Energy.* Energy blended with an iron will. How true to the words of Tennyson—"Man is man and master of his

destiny." "They conquer who believe they can." What an inspiration is such a life!

"If thou canst plan a noble deed
And never flag till it succeed,
Thougth in the strife thy heart shouldst bleed,
Whatever obstacle control, go on, true soul,
Thou'lt win the prize, thou'lt reach the goal."

The fourth word is *Character.* This noble man was an answer to the earnest prayer of Lyman Beecher: "God grant that our principal men may be men of principle." This man built the superstructure of his career on certain eternal principles—principles rock-hewn and diamond square. His partners were men of principle. He believed that nothing succeeds like character. Right is right as God is God! Right only and right always shall have the right of way in God's universe!

"Build it well, whate'er you do,
Build it strong and straight and true,
Build it clean and high and broad,
Build it for the eye of God."

The fifth word is *Religion.* Our friend who lies sleeping here was a great Christian. He believed in God. He believed in The Christ. He believed in The Book. He believed in The Church. He believed in The Immortality of the Soul. He believed in the Law of Love. As a splendid churchman he dreamed of a well-trained and efficient min-

istry. And a noble edifice—under the care and supervision of the Pacific School of Religion—will testify to future generations of the fulfillment of this dream.

The sixth word is *Kindness.* This great soul had a genius for friendship and was kind. We might say of him what a famous American orator said as he stood at the grave of a lamented brother: "If every one for whom my brother performed a deed of kindness should come, in this hour, and fling a rose upon his grave, tonight he would sleep beneath a wilderness of roses."

The last word is *Memory.* Any man who lives for nine and a half decades in full command of his faculties must spend many a thoughtful hour reading the story of the past years by the Lamp of Memory. This our departed friend, did. He loved, in the closing days of his life to turn over the pages of "fond memory." How appropriate and how comforting to him were the lines of Cardinal Newman:

"So long thy power has blest me,
Sure it still will lead me on,
O'er moor and fen,
O'er crag and torrent,
Till the night is gone,
And with the morn
Those angel faces smile
Which I have loved long since
And lost awhile."

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